



THE OBSERVER

SECOS Newsletter

Promoting and fostering the study of ornithology by observation, research and record keeping

Dumfries & Galloway 1st - 4th March 2024

This Newsletter describes the SECOS Long Weekend trip to Dumfries & Galloway from 1st to 4th March 2024. The trip was based on a scheduled itinerary. A species list is shown on the last page.

Weather

On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, the weather was light cloud and a gentle breeze. There was a heavy shower at Loch Ryan on Saturday but otherwise the weekend was rain free. On Monday, there was a clear blue sky all day. Throughout the weekend, temperatures were around 5-7°C. So, the weather was kind to us!

Travel

22 members booked the trip to Dumfries & Galloway. All members travelled by car and car sharing was encouraged, which meant that 11 cars were used. This was the first SECOS trip to Dumfries & Galloway since March 2019. We stopped at Tebay Services on the M6 for a welcome breakfast break. We sat in the nice dining area, looking out over a large pond towards the Lake District. On our walk back to the cars, we stopped to watch many rooks engaged in aerial courtship displays over a sizeable rookery adjacent to the car park. Their calls and aerial manoeuvres heralded the arrival of spring.

Day 1: Friday 1st March

Caerlaverock WWT

Caerlaverock WWT is a 1,400-acre wetland reserve situated on the north shore of the Solway Firth, to the south of Dumfries. It is famous for its vast flocks of over-wintering water-birds, including barnacle geese from Arctic Svalbard, pink-footed geese and whooper swans. It is home to one of only two UK populations of the "living fossil", the horseshoe shrimp (*Triops cancriformis*), and the UK's most northerly population of the natterjack toad.

Whooper Swan



The reserve provides a variety of habitats - salt marsh, lagoons, reedbed, grassland, woodland, ponds and lakes. The Saltcot Merse observatory gives views over the beach and Solway Firth.

On the approach road to the reserve, 100 whooper swans were seen grazing in a field.

On arrival, time spent scanning the bushes and trees bordering the car park proved productive. Singles of tree sparrow and bullfinch were noted, together with chaffinch, goldfinch, siskin, great tit, coal tit, blackbird, house sparrow, dunnock, collared dove and jackdaw. 12 species before we paid our entrance fee!

As we approached the Peter Scott Observatory, a goldcrest flitted around low down in a bush. From the hide, a scaup showed well, and several water birds were added to the day's list – pintail, wigeon, tufted duck, mallard, mute swan and moorhen. A single oystercatcher was recorded.

Further along the path, we stopped to watch a roe deer as it ran and jumped across a rough grass field towards us. In a field on the opposite side of the path, goosander, barnacle goose and gadwall were seen.

At the Campbell Hide, shoveler, teal, and a pair of stonechat were seen, together with a distant buzzard. At the Avenue Hide, there were many barnacle and pink-footed geese.

Returning along the path towards the Visitor Centre, skylarks were singing and about 10 yellowhammers flew over the path. At Sharp's Lookout, grey plover and redshank were spotted. At Folly Pond Hide, ruff and spotted redshank were added.

Yellowhammer



Caerlaverock NNR

A 5-minute drive brought us to Castle Corner car park at Caerlaverock NNR. Scanning the salt marsh gave us curlew, shelduck, little egret, oystercatcher, dunlin and reed bunting. A short walk along the woodland path added willow tit.

Glencaple

A 10-minute drive brought us to Glencaple, which provides views over the River Nith and Kirkconnell Merse (managed by the RSPB).

A flock of barnacle geese, including a leucistic individual, circled for a few minutes before landing in a distant field. Red-breasted merganser (male and female), cormorant and great black-backed gull were added to the day's list.

On the drive to the hotel along the A75, a red kite was spotted.

Hotels

We chose two hotels in Newton Stewart for our trip – The Bruce Hotel for bed and breakfast, and The Crown Hotel next door for dinner. The Bruce Hotel is undergoing a gradual refurbishment but it was adequate for our stay and the breakfast food and service were good. The Crown Hotel was excellent – good food and service. After a pre-dinner drink in The Bruce Hotel bar, we had dinner in the semi-private area of The Crown Hotel restaurant. After dinner, we gathered in the first-floor guest lounge of The Bruce Hotel to list the day's birds, then retired for a good night's sleep.

During our stay, birds seen in the vicinity of the hotel and the River Cree included kingfisher, blackcap and an impressive rook 'murmuration'.

Day 2: Saturday 2nd March

Portpatrick

On arrival at South Crescent car park, we immediately searched for black guillemots in the harbour and were not disappointed. 10 birds were seen either swimming or flying into crevices in the harbour wall. Several red-throated divers were on the sea. 2 shags flew across the sea and a rock pipit was seen nearby. A fulmar and a gannet flew past.





Loch Ryan

Loch Ryan is Scotland's most southerly sea loch. The area was settled by people from Scandinavia around 1,500 years ago. They made quite an impact – today, their words are still used to describe the landscape. While ferries travel through the loch to and from Ireland, the sheltered waters also provide a haven for thousands of birds, including grebes, divers, ducks, waders and geese.

A 30-minute drive brought us to Stranraer at the southern end of Loch Ryan, from where we worked our way up the west shore of the Loch on the A718, stopping at various points on the way.

Our first stop was the 'Picnic Area' on Sheachan Street, where we had lunch and then set up 'scopes to search for birds on the water. Eider, goldeneye, oystercatcher, herring gull, dunlin, turnstone, gannet, 3 scaup, 2 red-breasted mergansers, wigeon, common scoter, ringed plover and 2 distant Slavonian grebes were found.



The second stop was the 'Boat Ramp', just past Wig Bay Holiday Park. Here there were great crested grebe, cormorant, eider, common gull, rock pipit, oystercatcher and shag.

The third stop was RAF Wig Bay Seaplane Base. Sunderland flying boats flew from here in defence of convoys during World War II. Nowadays, the track from the road is heavily potholed so we parked our cars at the Seaplane Base and walked around The Wig (from the Norse word vik, meaning 'a small bay'). Here we experienced our only heavy shower of the weekend. Undeterred, we continued along the track, spotting a stonechat, 3 turnstone and 3 ringed plovers on the shingle, and 3 long-tailed ducks. Somewhat surprisingly, we watched 3 skylarks foraging among rocks on the shingle.



We soon reached a small brick shelter (which was full). From this point, a low-lying shingle spit curves out into the Loch. It is called The Scar (from the Norse word sker, meaning 'a rock in the sea'). Some brent geese took off from the end of The Scar, while a small flock of golden plover rested on the shingle.

After a brief stop at Morrisons in Stranraer to refuel, we headed for the east shore of the Loch. We were aware that the road was closed for bridge repairs at Cairnryan, south of the ferry port, but we calculated that it would not affect our itinerary and that proved to be the case.

Our fourth stop was at the car park opposite Balyett Farm, where there were no birds to be seen.

Our fifth and final stop was at a small lay-by, a short distance north of the fourth stop. A short footpath led to the shore. Those who arrived first had a fleeting glimpse of a long-tailed duck. Also seen were red-breasted merganser, eider, common scoter and two quite close Slavonian grebes.

West Freugh Airfield

On the way back to the hotel, a few people chose to drive the triangular route at West Freugh Airfield. They were rewarded with excellent views of a male hen harrier that circled a few times before dropping down to the ground to roost. In a distant field, a gaggle of white-fronted geese were spotted.

Day 3: Sunday 3rd March

Carlingwark Loch

Carlingwark Loch covers an area of approximately 55 acres, making it a significant water body in the region.



Goldeneye

During a 90-minute watch, many species were recorded – wigeon, tufted duck, mallard, Canada goose, little grebe trilling, great crested grebe, a single whooper swan, mute swan, coot, moorhen, grey heron, cormorant, oystercatcher, black-headed gull, herring gull, rook, jackdaw, woodpigeon, great spotted woodpecker, blue tit, great tit, nuthatch, wren, starling and reed bunting. Male goldeneyes were displaying by throwing back their heads. A female goosander flew in and then flew out again immediately. A red kite flew over the town. 18 greylag geese rested at the top of a grassy hill next to the cemetery.

On a small island, two otters were seen eating fish.

Ken-Dee Marshes RSPB

On arrival at Ken-Dee Marshes, we headed along the footpath, seeing a single fieldfare perched high in a tree. We then took a right turn along the track up to the Goose Viewing Point. From here were good views over Loch Ken and the surrounding fields. A small flock of greylag geese flew in to land out of sight. 4 pheasants were feeding in a field. 29 whooper swans were resting on Loch Ken. A great black-backed gull plunged into the water followed by a second bird a few minutes later. About 30 red kites were counted, probably attracted by the nearby Bellymack Hill Kite Feeding Station.

Woodhall Loch

We had planned to make a brief stop at Woodhall Loch to check its birding potential. At short notice, we decided not to go because a fishing match was underway. However, Dave, Elaine and Sylvia proceeded to the Loch and had a close encounter with a 'skinny dipper'. A man removed all his clothes and went for a wild swim, arguably the talking point of the day!

Laurieston to Gatehouse of Fleet

Next, we took the mountain road from Laurieston to Gatehouse of Fleet, stopping first at Kenick Burn car park, hoping to see crossbills but were unlucky.

We drove slowly up the mountain road, scanning the conifers, but there was no sign of crossbills.

On reaching the highest point, we waited patiently, scanning the area for a golden eagle. Red kite and raven were seen. Eventually, a distant **golden eagle** was spotted flying along the mountain ridge.

Crook of Baldoon RSPB

We had an unscheduled stop at Crook of Baldoon. An American wigeon had been reported so we decided to try our luck. On and around the pool, there were wigeon, teal, lapwing and snipe, and a swimming **American wigeon** was showing well. American wigeon is a rare North American vagrant, with only a few recorded in Britain each year. The adult male has a distinctive green and white head. A stock photo



is shown here for illustrative purposes. After a while, the wigeon were spooked and left the water to feed on a grassy bank. Later, they returned to the water, giving good views of the American wigeon once again.

On the salt marsh, there were large flocks of barnacle geese and pink-footed geese, 5 little egrets, a few curlew, ringed plover and dunlin. As we drove away from the reserve along the lane, a female sparrowhawk was seen perched on the top of a low hedge.

Day 4: Monday 4th March

Gatehouse of Fleet

Our first brief stop of the day was the River Fleet at Gatehouse of Fleet. There were good views of a pair of dippers. One bird flew into an apparent nest site above a small waterfall on the river bank. The other swam from one side of the river to the other. Although dippers are capable of paddling on the surface of the water, this is not typical behaviour.

2 great spotted woodpeckers were seen high in a tree.

Mersehead RSPB

Mersehead RSPB is a working farm and boasts a wide variety of habitats and wildlife.

At the Visitor Centre feeding station, yellowhammer, tree sparrow, house sparrow, greenfinch, chaffinch and robin were recorded.

A 500-metre walk took us to the Bruaich Hide. During the walk, thousands of barnacle geese were seen feeding in the fields, along with a few redshanks on the muddy scrapes. From the hide, teal, shoveler, curlew, wigeon, gadwall and lesser black-backed gull were seen.



Barnacle Geese_1

Barnacle Geese_2



Another 1100-metre walk took us to the Meida Hide, where we added a red kite and a grey heron. A peregrine was seen feeding on the ground. 2 roe deer were spotted. Skylarks and a Cetti's warbler were heard singing.

A few people headed for the beach, where dunlin were seen.

Southernness Point



Southernness Point lies at the eastern end of the Mersehead Sands and looks across the Solway Firth to the Cumbrian mountains. In 1748, a lighthouse was built at Southernness Point to direct shipping coming into the River Nith. Traditionally, it has been a good place to look for purple sandpipers.

We parked in the 19th Hole pub car park and walked a short distance to the rocky/sandy beach. With our 'scopes set up on the lighthouse rocks and sheltering from the wind, we scanned the shore and sea and found oystercatcher, redshank, dunlin, curlew, red-breasted merganser and 4 gannets. A flock of knot flew over the sea close to the tideline.

A large flock of house sparrows had gathered in bushes by the roadside.

Derek and Chris walked the beach, hoping to spot a purple sandpiper. Everyone else waited patiently for the tide to come in and, eventually, a solitary purple sandpiper was spotted (by Lydia) standing steadfast on some weathered rocks, its plumage blending subtly with the muted hues of the coastal landscape, while the sea spray enveloped the bird in a veil of mist.



Carsethorn

Carsethorn lies at the mouth of the River Nith. It served as a port for Dumfries from at least the 16th century, with emigrant ships leaving for North America and Australia in the late 18th century. It was further developed from the early 19th century with a Harbour Master's House (c. 1815) and a pier for the Dumfries-Liverpool steamer service (1840). After the steamer service ceased, Carsethorn became a centre for salmon fishing.

We parked in Solway Crescent car park and scanned the beach. A peregrine was spotted on the beach, plus oystercatcher, turnstone, curlew, redshank and wigeon.



SECOS Group, The Bruce Hotel, Newton Stewart

Thank you

Many thanks to the travellers who shared the Dumfries & Galloway weekend. It provided a perfect blend of brilliant destinations, excellent birdwatching opportunities, and delightful socialising with friends! We made priceless memories!

Credits – Images & Narrative

Whooper Swan - Tom Davies

Yellowhammer - Tom Davies

Black Guillemot - Tom Davies

Portpatrick - Tom Davies

Loch Ryan - Tom Davies

Brent Geese - Tom Davies

Goldeneye - Tom Davies

Narrative: Mike Tonks

American Wigeon - Mareca Americana, Cambridge, Maryland | Flickr*

Barnacle Geese_1 - Mike Tonks

Barnacle Geese_2 - Tom Davies

Southernness Point Lighthouse - Anthea Gater

Southernness Point Beach - Sylvia Jarvis

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Species List



111 species were seen/heard during the trip.

Green text indicates 31 new species that were added to the 2024 SECOS Field Trips Total, which now stands at 116 species.

Brent Goose	Coot	Little Egret	Song Thrush
Canada Goose	Little Grebe	Golden Eagle	Mistle Thrush
Barnacle Goose	Great Crested Grebe	Sparrowhawk	Blackbird
Greylag Goose	Slavonian Grebe	Hen Harrier	Fieldfare
Pink-footed Goose	Oystercatcher	Red Kite	Robin
White-fronted Goose	Lapwing	Buzzard	Stonechat
Mute Swan	Golden Plover	Kingfisher	Dipper
Whooper Swan	Grey Plover	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Tree Sparrow
Shelduck	Ringed Plover	Kestrel	House Sparrow
Mandarin Duck	Curlew	Merlin	Dunnock
Shoveler	Turnstone	Peregrine	Grey Wagtail
Gadwall	Knot	Jay	Pied Wagtail
Wigeon	Ruff	Magpie	Meadow Pipit
American Wigeon	Dunlin	Jackdaw	Chaffinch
Mallard	Purple Sandpiper	Rook	Rock Pipit
Pintail	Snipe	Carrion Crow	Bullfinch
Teal	Redshank	Raven	Greenfinch
Tufted Duck	Spotted Redshank	Coal Tit	Goldfinch
Scaup	Black-headed Gull	Willow Tit	Siskin
Eider	Common Gull	Blue Tit	Yellowhammer
Common Scoter	Great Black-backed Gull	Great Tit	Reed Bunting
Long-tailed Duck	Herring Gull	Skylark	
Goldeneye	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Cetti's Warbler	
Goosander	Black Guillemot	Long-tailed Tit	
Red-breasted Merganser	Red-throated Diver	Blackcap	
Pheasant	Fulmar	Goldcrest	
Feral Pigeon	Gannet	Wren	
Woodpigeon	Cormorant	Nuthatch	
Collared Dove	Shag	Treecreeper	